7 days of
Psychology

If you believe you can, you can

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Reference: Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. Psychological Review*, 84*(2), 191-215. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.84.2.191

Two very important things happened in 1977. First, a psychologist by the name of Albert Bandura published a paper titled “Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change”. Second, I was born. Thankfully for you, we are going to focus on the former.

If you get some time, it is worth reading more about Albert Bandura. He was ranked 4th on the list of most eminent psychologists of the 20th Century. This guy has made some incredible contributions to the field.

The paper of his that we are talking about in this email has been cited over 60,000 times. To put this in perspective, 75% of psychology papers receive less than 27 citations. A figure of 60,000+ is out of this world.

So let’s dig in……

It’s 1977 - a shift is underway in clinical psychology

For the importance of this paper to make sense, you need to know that in 1977 there was shift taking place in clinical psychology - the field of psychology devoted to directly helping individuals with psychological disorders.

At that time, the way that fear and avoidance based psychological disorders (e.g. phobias where you have an irrational fear of a specific object or situation) were being understood and treated was very much based in behaviourism.

Just to be clear,It is perfectly legitimate to be afraid of clowns

Behaviourism holds that much of human behaviour can be explained on the basis of innate or learned associations between a stimulus and a response. Basically we come to associate certain objects and situations with either positive or negative outcomes (including feelings). Naturally, we are drawn towards objects/situations that elicit or are associated with positive outcomes (reinforced), and we avoid objects/situations that elicit or are associated with negative outcomes (punished). In short, we avoid those things that elicit fear and anxiety.

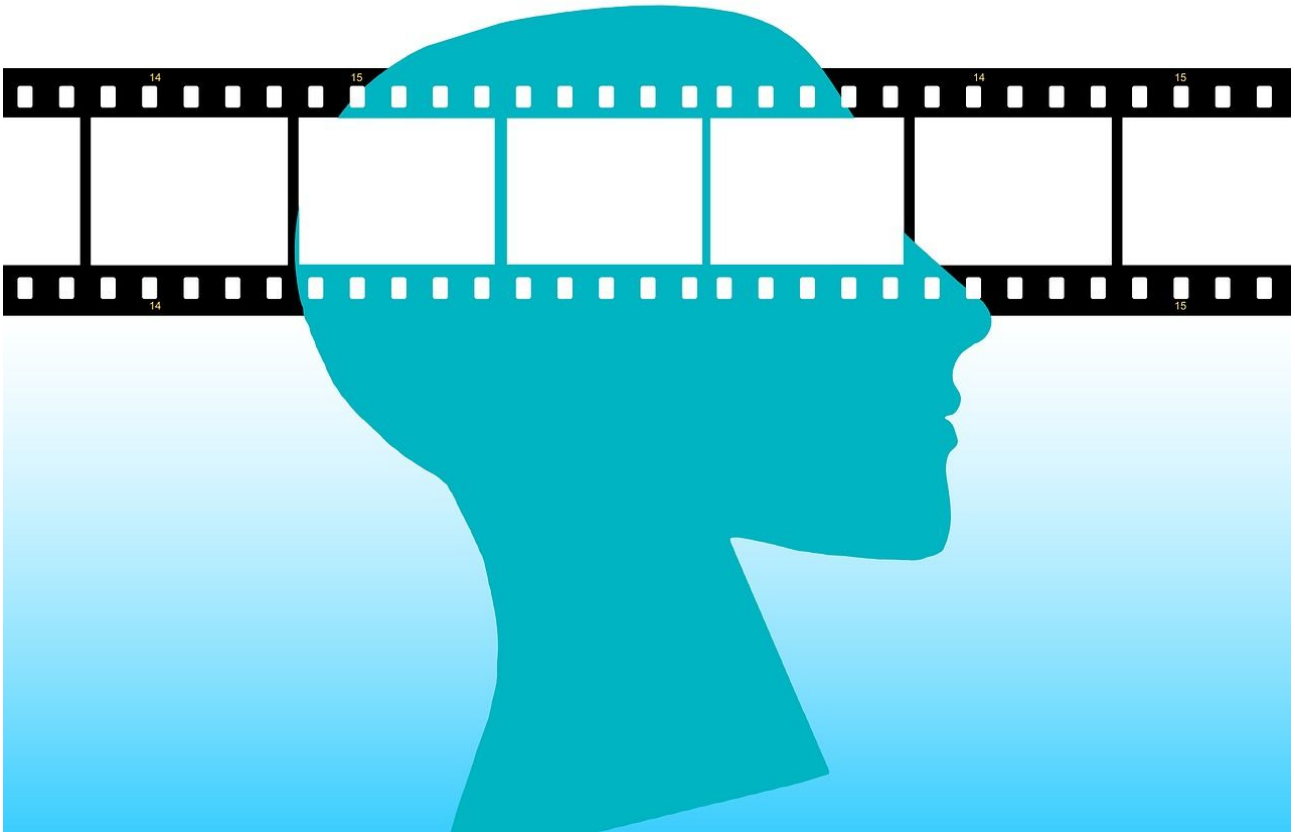
Behaviourists (at the time) didn't believe it was necessary to delve much into a person's inner world (e.g. thoughts and beliefs) when treating fears. Instead the focus was on simply changing the associations a person made with an object/situation by providing them with repeated positive (or neutral) experiences of the object/situation.

For example, a person with a snake phobia would be asked to repeatedly interact with snakes (either imagined or real or both), whilst at the same time, using simple techniques to address the negative feelings that arose (e.g. relaxation). After repeated positive or neutral pairings, the individual would be less likely to avoid the feared object/situation - i.e. their fear would reduce. This was typically done in a progressive fashion, that is, starting with relatively simple exposure exercises (e.g. seeing a snake in a book) and building up to more difficult ones (e.g. holding a snake) - a process called systematic **desensitisation** (remember that word).

These techniques are incredibly powerful and are still used today. In fact, the concept of exposure, namely confronting feared situations/ objects, is considered central to the treatment of many psychological disorders.

But the behaviourists weren't the only people interested in fear and avoidance. Other psychologists felt that there was a lot to gain from looking at thoughts and beliefs. The cognitivists (let's call them that for

the time being) felt that the consideration of thoughts and beliefs could add significantly to our understanding of why exposure-based treatment approaches worked and perhaps even improve those treatments. Rather than seeing people as simply making associations, which felt a little mindless and automatic, the cognitivists proposed that our thinking (cognition) plays a important role in the acquisition of new behaviours.



Maybe seeing into our thoughts would be helpful

Consider the following. Humans make symbolic representations of the world in our minds, and these representations fuel our expectations of how things will work out, our motivation to engage in certain behaviours and how we behave. Because of this we are able to learn by observing our own and others' behaviour, noting the consequences and adjusting our behaviour over time. Because we 'think', we can stop a behaviour if we know it will no longer be rewarded in the future, or start it again if we know it will. We can set goals and evaluate our progress towards these goals. We can learn powerful lessons from a single event, without having to have multiple exposures. To the cognitivists it was obvious that thinking played a role in how we developed fears and avoided things, and so they were doing a lot of research on the topic.

Bandura wanted to bridge the gap between research, which was increasingly cognitive in nature, and practice, which remained very behavioural. He was interested in whether cognitive phenomena could help explain and improve psychological treatments. He also wanted to show that it was possible to measure and study cognitive processes (i.e. thinking), which many behaviourists rejected.

Bandura puts forward the concept of self-efficacy

In his 1977 paper, Bandura introduced the concept of self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy is an individual's belief in their ability to achieve goals. More specifically, it is the conviction one has that they can successfully execute the behaviour(s) required to produce a particular outcome.

Let's consider an example.

I play the guitar, although not particularly well. I believe that an excellent guitar performance (*behaviour*) would draw praise from an audience (*outcome*). I am quite confident of this as I have seen many excellent guitar performances on Youtube, and seen that the comments are highly positive.

I can also describe to you what constitutes an 'excellent guitar performance'. It is a mix of sounding nice, but also demonstrating dexterity and technical ability. It is enjoyed aurally as pleasant music, but also visually and technically from seeing the coordinated movement of fingers on the guitar.

But do I believe that I can execute an 'excellent guitar performance'? No, I don't. Therefore, I lack self-efficacy when it comes to excellent guitar performances.

I consider my guitar ability somewhere along the lines of this

The extent to which a person **believes** they can successfully execute a given behaviour will influence:

1) Whether they will even make an attempt at the behaviour;
2) How much effort they will expend in trying to do the behaviour;
3) How long they will persist with the behaviour in the face of obstacles or aversive experiences.

Broadly speaking, we will get involved in activities that we judge ourselves capable of handling and avoid activities that we believe are beyond our ability. This can be the case before we have even tried the behaviour in question.

Bandura thought these beliefs were important in the treatment of people who had fear and avoidance disorders. Because treatments required that individuals interact with their feared object/situation in increasingly more difficult and frightening ways, Bandura wondered if their beliefs about whether they could, influenced whether they did or not.

So he tested it

He took snake phobics (individuals with an irrational fear of snakes) and divided them into three groups.

One group was given the normal exposure based-treatment in which they were asked to engage in increasingly more frightening interactions with snakes, which as you can imagine was pretty freaky for them.

One group witnessed the therapist going through these interaction exercises, but didn't engage directly in it themselves. They were probably a little relieved :)

The final group received no intervention. They were called the 'control group'.

Do snakes freak you out?

Bandura measured their beliefs about being able to do the interaction exercises before treatment, immediately after treatment, and then finally after a test to see how well their treatment had gone.

The test involved ‘performance tasks’ with a boa constrictor and corn snake, that were different to the snakes used in treatment. ‘Performance tasks’ sounds a bit kinky, but a ‘performance task’ was simply a basic interaction with the snake. There were a number of tests with increasing level of difficulty, where difficulty was based on how closely the person had to interact with the snake.

Bandura hypothesised that a participant’s self-reported self-efficacy - how much they believed they could interact with the snakes - would predict their actual performance on the exposure tasks.

What did he find?

Consistent with what was already known about these types of treatments, the first finding was that the full exposure group did better than the observed exposure group, which in turn did better than the control group. Basically the more directly a participant interacted with the snakes, the more likely it was they would overcome their phobia.

The most important finding, however, was that **each participant’s sense of self-efficacy about how well they could do each of the exposure tasks was closely aligned to how well they actually did**.

In fact, when the participants were doing the testing after their treatment, self-efficacy for each performance task was a much better predictor of whether they went through it than whether they had successfully done the task previously in their treatment. This is important. The belief in being able to interact with the snake was a more powerful predictor of interaction, than whether they had successfully interacted with the snake previously.

This was a big finding because it challenged the desensitisation model that said that we avoid things because of how we **feel**, such as anxiety and fear. Bandura’s findings instead supported the idea that we avoid things if we **think** we are not able to cope with it; that is, we don’t have the coping skills to deal with the situation or object.

Since then…….

It might sound simple now, but Bandura’s work transformed how we go about combining cognitive and behavioural components in research and therapy.

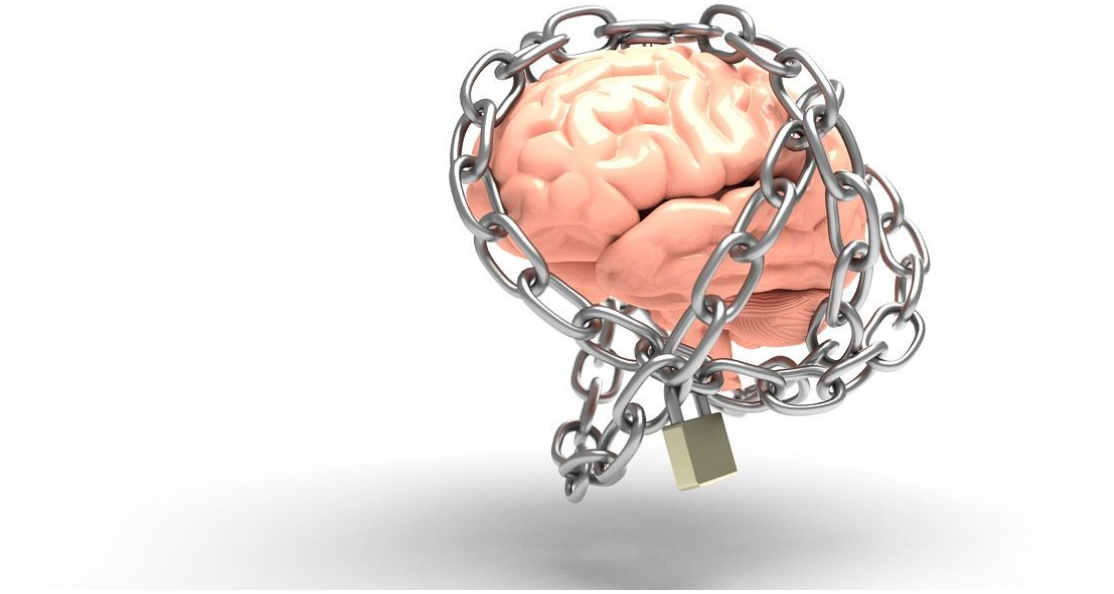
At the time of his study, there were very few examples of successfully measuring cognitive (i.e. thinking) variables in treatment research, let alone showing that they were powerful predictors of outcome.

This had three really big impacts:

First, self-efficacy went on to become one of the most measured and studied cognitive variables in psychology. It has been used successfully in many fields of psychology - learning/education, health behaviour change, coping with chronic disability and more.

Second, Bandura showed that cognitive variables could be measured and meaningfully understood as part of how people adapt. The measurement of cognitive variables in this kind of research became commonplace.

Third, his work rippled through treatment - and in combination with other practitioners at the time (e.g. Beck, Ellis) made CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy) the dominant treatment paradigm in psychological disorders. In CBT, both behavioural and cognitive factors are addressed when dealing with fears, worries and negative emotions.



Our beliefs about our ability can be self-defeating

Some key ideas about self-efficacy to apply in your own life

In addition to becoming one of the most cited papers in psychology ever, Bandura's paper also contains some ideas that are helpful in understanding self-efficacy in our own lives.

Bandura said self-efficacy comes from four sources. We can harness these ideas to increase our own self-efficacy in specific domains. Take public speaking as an example, which a lot of people fear and don't feel good at. Here are four ways to feel more confident in your ability to speak in public.

1. **Practice** - I hate to break the news to you, but we feel more confident doing things if we identify the skills involved and practice them repeatedly. As we improve over time, we get more confident. Interestingly, we will feel more confident if we have a few setbacks along the way, as overcoming these setbacks is a powerful confidence boost. So embrace all the opportunities you have to speak in public.
2. **Watching others** - Seeing other people, like yourself, successfully speak in public is also powerful - even more so if you see that person get better over time, with more practice. Therefore take any opportunities you have to see your peers or colleagues speak in public and observe what it is they do to succeed.
3. **Tell yourself you can do, or get someone else to do so** - Just telling yourself you can do something is generally not powerful enough to make you feel confident that you can do it, but it may be enough to at least get you to try, and then practice takes over.

4. **Accept the fear and do it anyway** - When we get nervous or fearful about a situation or task, we naturally tend to believe that we are not going to be able to do the task well. However, Bandura found that participants who were scared, but still felt confident they could do the task, were able to do the task. So when you are feeling scared about a task, accept that the fear is there, but focus instead of the task, the skills needed to do it, and practising those skills.

One of the most common fears but you can get better with practice

Final takeaway message

Bandura's paper was one of the most influential papers in psychology. It showed that what we believe or think about our ability to do something plays a significant role in whether we do that 'something'. We aren't just hostages to our previous learning experiences or our feelings.

So if there is something in your life that you really want to do, but don't believe you have the ability to do it, first note that those beliefs are playing a big role in you not doing it, but more importantly, that those beliefs can be changed.

Where to read more

Typing 'self-efficacy' into Google will yield you an extraordinarily large number of articles and examples of the concept in use. If you find the concept interesting, I encourage you to start your own exploration of the topic. I suggest starting by combining the search term of 'self-efficacy' with another term that captures an important part of your life (e.g. student, workplace, sports, health).

The 1977 paper can be a little difficult to get hold of if you don't have a university connection, but the wikipedia entry is a decent read :) - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-efficacy

Honestly you'll have no trouble finding interesting stuff to read on self-efficacy online. It is such a widespread concept now.